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# In Iran, the stamp of Islam is everywhere

Tehran, Iran

Islam is the operative word in today's Iran.

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, even the national Iranian dish, *chelo kebab* (rice with meat) is now advertised by restaurants as *chelo kebab Islami*.

The country is now known as the Islamic Republic of Iran. The old imperial crest has been converted to a symbol that reads in Arabic as both "Allah" and "There is no God but Allah," the Muslim confession of faith.

Islam has pervaded all aspects of Iranians' lives.

People wear Islamic dress, watch Islamic TV shows, get an

Islamic education at school, are policed by Islamic Revolutionary Guards (paramilitary religious police), give their children Islamic names instead of traditional Persian ones, and even drink "Islamic beer," which has no alcohol.

Mosques are being built in neighborhoods where previously there were none. In city centers where statues of the Shah once stood, new monuments are being built to look like Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, the third-holiest Muslim shrine after Mecca and Medina. Muslims originally faced Al Aqsa rather than Mecca when they prayed. The need to recapture this mosque — as well as Jerusalem, or Qods, as it is referred to by the Islamic Republic and other Arabs — is a major theme of the government.

Iranians are constantly reminded by posters and in the news media that after Karbala (a major Shiite pilgrimage town in Iraq) is regained by victory in the war against Iraq, the Iranian Army can then sweep on to liberate Qods. The government has declared an annual holiday called "Qods Day" to increase awareness of the issue.

Much of the structure of today's Iranian government is based on Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's book "Islamic Government,"

written in 1971 while he was in exile. In it he says the first principle of Islamic government is that no one but God has the right to govern anyone.

However, he interprets the Koranic quotation, "Obey God, His prophet, and those who are in authority among you" to mean that Islamic jurists, called mujtahids, should rule in God's place.

Iran is ruled by high-ranking religious scholars. The Constitution gives supreme authority to a religious leader and Ayatollah Khomeini is entitled to hold this position for the rest of his life.

Hojatolislam Ali Khamenei is President, Hojatolislam Hashemi Rafsanjani is the speaker of parliament, and Ayatollah Mussavi Ardebili is the chief justice. ("Hojatolislam" and "ayatollah" are the two main ranks of mujtahid.)

The ulema, or Islamic scholars, fill many other important positions in the Iranian government. At the local level, the imam jomehs, leaders of Friday prayers in towns and cities, have the most power. They have generally been appointed as Khomeini's personal representatives.

The ulema have become somewhat of a privileged class in Iran. "Before the Revolution, there used to be so many clerics walking in the streets — but now they drive around in cars," one housewife remarks. Most clerics in high positions are accompanied by large escorts of armed Revolutionary Guards.

Islamic law is the law of the land. A prominent sign in a hotel tea room reads, "Women without their *hijab* [head covering] arranged properly will be sentenced to 74 beatings with a stick."

How strictly these laws are enforced is difficult to estimate. Around the corner from where I was staying in Tehran, one woman was reportedly given 100 lashes for adultery. But my host, a European who had lived in Iran since the revolution, said it was the first time he had

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heard of such a happening. He felt many of the horror stories circulating in the West about harsh punishments for infringements of Islamic law are exaggerated.

The educational system has also been infused with Islam. Many academics and professors fled Iran at the time of the revolution, and clerics have taken their places. Religious scholars now constitute the majority of university admissions committees, and one-sixth of the questions on the entrance examination are now on Islam, a freshman at Tehran University said.

The student said the questions cover subjects ranging from Islamic philosophy ("Describe how God has justice in the world") to details of prayer procedure ("If you realize part way through that you forgot a step, should you continue or start again?") Once enrolled at university, students must to take several courses in Islamic studies, he said.

Iranians react differently to the pervasive influence of Islam in their lives.

"We are a people with a deep spiritual sense. The revolution started because we felt we had lost our spiritual core to Western consumerism," one Shiite, a teacher of English, explained. "Now it has been restored. Look at the hundreds of thousands of people that have thronged to Friday prayers every week since the revolution."

But a young Kurdish woman disagreed.

"I am sick of Islam. All we hear is Islamic this, Islamic that. I'm about ready to convert to Zoroastrianism," she said. "All they [Zoroastrians] ask is that you have good thoughts, good words, and good deeds — who can argue with that?"

Iran's Islamic system has a strong attraction for some foreign Shiites.

"I've been to most of the Muslim countries, and I just came back from Mecca, but Iran is the most Islamic place in the world," says a Lebanese woman visiting the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad. "It's like a dream, it's so spiritual here. Look at how these people give everything for the war against Iraq: themselves, their money, their jewelry."

Her daughter adds: "People have been so kind to us. The shopkeeper did not want to let me pay for my *chador* when he heard I was from Lebanon. He said I was his Muslim sister."

The Islamization of Iranian society does not appear to have resulted in the persecution of the country's religious minorities, with the exception of the Bahais, who are regarded as heretics for recognizing another prophet after Muhammad.

But Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews, all considered "People of the Book" (monotheists with a revealed scripture) have largely been left alone. Since many of them are businessmen, professionals, or involved in other independent occupations, they have generally not been adversely affected by the priority given to Shiites for government jobs. The biggest problem voiced was the closing of the Armenian schools for two years. The government allowed them to reopen last fall.

"We all celebrated when we heard the good news," said one Armenian man. "It was quite a worry for us, since there was no way for our children to study the Armenian language. The only other major change is the *chador*. It's not that much of a problem for our women; after all, the Virgin Mary wore a veil, so they figure they can, too."

The freedom of worship of the protected minority religions is relatively unhampered.

Explains an Anglican priest: "I still conduct services every Sunday in my church, and the government allows me to operate my Christian bookshop. After all, Islam honors Christ as a great prophet. Nonetheless, we try to keep somewhat of a low profile."

The sacred fire has not stopped burning for 2,000 years at the main fire temple in Kerman, with the exception of a few days during the Arab invasion which converted Iran from Zoroastrianism to Islam in the 7th century. Here, and at Yazd, the two remaining Zoroastrian centers in Iran, the ancient practices are followed without restriction despite the resurgence of Islamic fervor since the 1979 revolution.